

Towards preventing a biological weapons technology race.

The BW convention, signed 1972, was a useful partial step towards controlling biological and toxin weapons, notwithstanding its well-understood limitations with respect to a) verification, b) enforcement, and c) its inability to deal with weapons-related R & D (as opposed to production and deployment). Intrinsic to its utility was an expectation that it would foster a climate of mutually advantageous, cooperative verification and enforcement, meeting the deeper interests of all sides.

The convention has undoubtedly been helpful in forestalling a major technology race in BW, compared e.g. to recent history in cruise missiles. However, the limitations have become involved in, and perhaps now contribute to, other elements of international competition. The result today is a high degree of unmitigated suspicion about actions and intentions of 'the other sides', with grave consequences for 1) the credibility of arms control agreements generally - especially those not manifestly verifiable by the grossest of national means; and 2) the potentiality for fueling a major technology race between the superpowers, within the letter if not the spirit of the 1972 BW convention. Since biological agents could be manufactured in plants primarily designed for medical or industrial purposes, and since we have the prospect of still newer and more effective weapons-agents from biotechnology, the prospects of a threatening 'breakout' in violation of the 1972 convention further poison international harmony.

Meanwhile, international security is more likely to be threatened by the proliferation of BW capability to less responsible powers; the nuclear superpowers have a marginal need, at most, for BW atop their nuclear retaliatory capability. The possibility of regulating that proliferation is gravely impaired by the current lack of cooperation in the enforcement of the BW convention. The irresponsibility just mentioned is aggravated by the likelihood that biological weapons will spread infection from the targets under attack, with potentially unlimited collateral damage, even retroaction.

It will not be easy to design formal procedures for a more cooperative approach: the minimum that should be sought promptly is to set up a bilateral forum (akin to the Standing Consultative Commissions) where questions can be raised and pressed on matters that are eliciting anxieties about compliance with the purposes of the BW convention. The treatment of the "Sverdlovsk case" is a counter example: in the absence of a pre-agreed forum, it was given all too much external publicity, allowing it to be regarded as a "propaganda gambit". The "answers" offered in print about the "foodborne epidemic of intestinal anthrax" at Sverdlovsk were so lacking in detail, they did not meet the minimum standards of a scientific or public health report. Above all there was no forum where the matter could be pursued more fully by technically informed experts.

We face a similar situation today about allegations of secret biotechnology research in the USSR. Suspicions about this are of course deepened by the holding of David Goldfarb on charges that he was about to take national-security-related biological specimens with him.

As a first step, we should ask that the Soviet Academy augment its CISAC delegation with scientists expert in the relevant fields, and that we establish, jointly, an agenda to open up a discussion about the matters that are raising so much suspicion. We can then undertake the very important practical task of developing means to discourage the further proliferation of biological weaponry.